DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 791 CS 209 764

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TITLE The Effect of Ownership on Newspaper Endorsements.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conservatism; Content Analysis; *Editorials; Influences; Journalism; Liberalism; *Mass Media Effects; *Media Research; *Newspapers; *Ownership; *Political Attitudes; Politics; Voting
IDENTIFIERS California; Journalism Research; *Political Endorsements; Readership Analysis

ABSTRACT

A study examined whether type of ownership affected editorial endorsement patterns and the impact of endorsements on voters. The endorsements of 51 California daily newspapers were tabulated for 25 statewide candidate races and 158 ballot propositions during elections of 1970, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1978, and 1980. Each endorsement was judged to represent either a liberal or a conservative stand on the candidate or issue at stake. To determine the impact of endorsement editorials, the election results in the circulation areas of newspapers and in the areas of group-owned and independently owned papers were compared with statewide averages for various propositions and candidate races. Results indicated that (1) endorsements by independently owned papers had more apparent impact than those of group-owned papers, (2) group-owned papers tended to take more liberal stands than independent papers, and (3) papers sold during the period under study tended to take more liberal stands after they changed hands. (HOD)

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THE EFFECT OF OWNERSHIP ON NEWSPAPER ENDORSEMENTS

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Presented to the Newspaper Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, August 1986

CS209764

Abstract

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A study of 51 California newspapers found that the endorsements of independently owned papers had more apparent impact than those of group-owned papers. Readers may hold stronger loyalty to familiar, locally owned papers, but loyalty may grow toward new managements as they become familiar. Group papers tended to take more liberal stands than independent papers, and the papers that sold tended to take more liberal stands after they were sold.

THE EFFECT OF OWNERSHIP ON NEWSPAPER ENDORSEMENTS

In this study of 51 California daily newspapers, an attempt was made to determine whether type of ownership made a difference in editorial endorsement patterns and in the impact of endorsements on voters. In brief, it was found that group-owned newspapers tended to take more liberal stands than independent papers. The group papers, in addition, appeared to exert slightly less influence on voters, but the results suggest that differences tended to disappear as readers became accustomed to the new owners.

Previous studies that attempted to measure the effects of editorial endorsements made no effort to differentiate between newspapers on the basis of ownership.[1] In one study that looked a group ownership, Ralph R. Thrift, Jr., who was not concerned with endorsements or with editorial effects as such, found evidence in 1975 that editorials "become less vigorous" after newspapers had been purchased by groups. (He identified four characteristics that he associated with editorial vigor: a local topic, an argumentative form, a controversial topic, and a mobilization of information in the editorial.) In Thrift's sample, while the average number of daily editorials declined for the newspapers as a whole (17

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percent), the average declined even more sharply for group-owned papers (24 percent).[2] Thus, he found that the group papers wrote not only less vigorous editorials but fewer of them as well.

In contrast, Wackman et al found in a study published in 1975 that independent newspapers were less likely to make editorial endorsements, but the study was limited to presidential elections. The Wackman study found that group-owned papers were more likely to support the favored candidate of the press in every election (which, in most of the presidential elections, was the Republican).[3]

Pilegge, in a 1981 study limited to Alabama, found group newspapers more likely than independent papers to endorse Republican candidates for national and state offices.[4]

While these earlier studies provide few insights into the effects of group ownership, they at least suggest that type of ownership can make a difference in editorial policies.

Liberal vs. Conservative Endorsements

In the current study, the endorsements of the 51 California papers were tabulated for 25 statewide candidate races and 158 ballot propositions during elections of 1970, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1978, and 1980. Each endorsement was judged to represent either a liberal or a conservative stand on the candidate or issue at stake. Endorsements of Democratic

candidates (as well as John Anderson for president in 1976) were considered to be liberal; Republican endorsements, conservative. On propositions, liberal stands were identified as those that supported civil and individual rights, increased taxes, and expanded government programs. Opposite stands were considered to be conservative. Approximately 63 percent of all editorial stands were liberal. (See Table 1.)

The percentages of liberal stands varied little during the decade for the newspapers as a whole (between 62 and 66 percent). Year-to-year differences were not regarded as important, since the percentage of liberal endorsements in any year depended largely on the specific issues and candidates on the ballot. More meaningful are the differences between the two categories of newspapers, group-owned and independent.

Table 1 shows that the difference between the two groups grew from 3 percent (66 compared to 63) in 1970 to 12 percent in 1980 (66 compared to 54).

At least part of what happened is reflected in the

Table 1 Percentage of Liberal Endorsements, Statewide Elections, 1970-80

	1970-80	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	Props	Cands
Independent/ Group-Owned		25/ 26	22/ 29	20/ 31	18/ 33	17/ 34	12/ 38		
All Newspapers	.63	.64	.66	.62	.62	.63	.63	.68	.42
Group-Owned	.65	.66	.64	.64	.65	.66	.66	.69	.44
Independent	.61	.63	.69	.58	.58	.57	.54	.67	.39

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changed endorsement patterns of the 13 newspapers that were purchased by groups during the decade. Table 2 shows the rankings of the 13 newspapers on a liberal-conservative scale for each of the election years. The 51 papers were ranked on the basis of adding a point for each liberal endorsement, subtracting a point for each conservative endorsement, and giving no points for no endorsement. (In instances in which two or more papers had the same number of points, each of the tying papers was given the same median score. Thus, if three papers shared the third lowest score, they would hold positions three, four, and five on the spectrum, and each would be given a ranking of four.)

When the rankings of papers in the elections before they were sold are compared with rankings following the sales, it was found that 11 of the 13 had moved toward the liberal end of the spectrum and two toward the conservative end (a total of 144 steps in the liberal direction compared to 10 in the conservative direction). Of the eight papers that were sold before the 1978 election, the change on the spectrum remained relatively unchanged in subsequent elections, with one exception, the Vallejo Times-Herald, which after two elections, but still under the same ownership, moved back toward a more conservative position.

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Table 2 Rankings on Liberal-Conservative Scale in Six Elections+

	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	No. of Steps**	
Berkeley Gazette	44	30*[1]	35	27	15	6	14	Liberal
Contra Costa Independent	40	30*[1]	35	27	15	6	10	Liberal
Chico Enterprise-Record	44	48*	39	36	35	44	4	Conserv
Stockton Record	15	26	18*	15	20	14	8	Liberal
Vallejo Times-Herald	40	37	7*	11	35	36	30	Liberal
Monterey Peninsula Herald	11	12	11	9*	20	10	2	Liberal
Redding Record Searchlight	20	7	18	24*	24	33	6	Conserv
Daily News of Los Angeles	47	45	44	39	20*	17	19	Liberal
Oakland Tribune	47	16	25	14	20	10*	10	Liberal
Escondido Times-Advocate	31	10	14	20	26	14*	12	Liberal
Marin County Independent	36	41	28	45	48	46*	2	Liberal
Redwood City Tribune	40	20	30	31	31[2]		21	Liberal
Palo Alto Times	11	10	25	17	31[2]		21	Liberal
Peninsula Times-Tribune						10*[2]		

\+ 1=most liberal on spectrum; 51=most conservative
* First election year following purchase by new owner
** Change in position on spectrum in election following sale of paper
[1] Purchased by same group; papers' identities retained
[2] Purchased by same group, December 1977; papers merged April 1979; impact of new management felt in 1980 election

Apparent Impact of Endorsements

The study of the 51 newspapers was not designed to determine whether causal relationships existed between ownership and voting results. Thus, when results indicate that some relationship may have existed, reference is made to "apparent effect" or "apparent impact" of endorsements.

In attempting to determine the impact of endorsement editorials, the election results in the circulation areas of newspapers and in the areas of group-owned and independently owned papers were compared with statewide averages for various propositions and candidate races. Gregg used this approach in a study of California newspapers in the 1948-62

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elections,[5] and Rystrom used a modified approach for California newspapers in the 1978 and 1980 elections.[6] The percentage figures in Table 1 were obtained by: (1) comparing the local (city or county) voting percentage on the side endorsed by an individual paper with the state percentage on that issue; (2) then multiplying the total vote in the local area by the difference (plus or minus) in the percentage; and (3) at the end of each tabulation adding these votes for all papers in a category and dividing the result by the total vote involved. This then became the percentage either above or below the statewide vote, and thus was the apparent effect of endorsements.

Two sets of tabulations were made for each issue and candidate rate: voting areas in which papers took liberal stands and those in which they took conservative stands.

A comparison of voting percentages in a single newspaper's circulation area, or in a small number of areas, is not likely to produce statistically reliable results, since individual circulation areas vary widely in terms of Democratic-Republican and liberal-conservative ratios. A liberal endorsement, for example, might sway a substantial number of voters, but, if the community is strongly conservative to begin with, the voting margin for the conservative side might remain large in spite of a positive impact of a liberal endorsement. Sizable groupings are obtained, however, when the 51 newspapers are divided into

those that were independently owned and those that were group-owned. In the 1970 election 25 papers were independent; 26 group-owned. By 1980, 12 were independent; 38 group-owned. (Two of the group-purchased papers were merged.) The groups were large enough to produce significantly reliable figures at .001 Chi Square.

The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4. For the 51 newspapers as a whole, the overall net apparent impact of endorsements amounted to only 1.1 percent (Table 3). For independent papers, however, the apparent impact was 1.8 percent compared to only 0.9 for group-owned papers. Somewhat similar patterns are seen when primary and general elections are considered separately (2.6 to 1.7 percent for primaries and 1.4 to 0.5 percent for general elections, for independent

Table 3 Apparent Impact of Endorsements: Overall; Primary vs. General Elections; Propositions vs. Candidate Races

	All Propositions and Candidates (n=184)	Primary Elections (n=66)	General Elections (n=118)	Propositions (n=159)	Candidates (n=25)
All Papers	1.1*+	1.8	0.7	1.2	0.1
Liberal stand	1.2	2.1	0.7	1.1	2.4
Conservative stand	0.8	1.1	0.7	1.4	-0.8
Independents	1.8	2.6	1.4	2.3	-1.5
Liberal stand	2.7	3.3	2.4	2.6	5.3
Conservative stand	0.2	0.8	0.0	1.4	-2.9
Group-Owned	0.9	1.7	0.5	1.0	0.5
Liberal stand	0.9	1.9	0.3	0.8	1.9
Conservative stand	1.0	1.2	0.9	1.4	-0.1

* Difference between composite statewide percentage and composite percentage of popular vote favoring newspapers' endorsed position
\+ All Chi Square tests significant at $p<.001$

and group papers, respectively) and when ballot propositions are considered separately (2.3 to 1.0 percent). The pattern is reversed for candidate races (-1.5 for independent to 0.5 for group-owned), but the figures are almost too small to consider.

One possible explanation for the smaller apparent impact of the group-owned papers lies in the stronger liberal endorsement pattern of these papers shown in Table 1. Perhaps this more-liberal stance put them less in tune with their communities than more conservative stands would have. Yet the figures in Table 3 cast doubts on this possibility: Group-owned papers had almost exactly the same impact with liberal stands (1.0 percent) as they did with conservative stands (0.9), and independent papers had substantially more impact with liberal stands (2.7 to 0.2).

Thrift's finding that group-owned papers tended to publish less vigorous editorials suggests another possible explanation for the apparently smaller impact of group papers, but the present study was not designed to examine the content of an editorial beyond the tabulation of its conclusion (for or against a proposition or candidate).

Thrift's finding that group papers published fewer editorials found little or no support in this study. Of the 13 newspapers that changed hands during the period of the study, only two displayed markedly differing patterns in this regard following purchase by a new owner. These two were the

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Berkeley Gazette and the Contra Costa Independent, both purchased by the same company between the 1970 and 1972 elections. In the election before the sale, both papers had taken a stand on all issues on the ballot. In the subsequent five election years, they took no stand on 9.4 percent of the propositions and candidate races. (Following the sale, both papers, while maintaining separate identities, took identical positions on endorsements.) The other 11 papers displayed a slight tendency to be more diligent in taking stands on election propositions and races after they were sold. They sat out 2.4 percent of the time before purchase but only 1.9 percent after purchase.

In a study of media influence in 1977, McQuail found that endorsement by an individual or institution--by sources of status or authority--with strong claims to trust and loyalty "can be crucial in a campaign."[7] Perhaps readers tended to have stronger feelings of trust and loyalty toward locally owned papers than toward papers owned by out-of-town corporations. Perhaps, after changes in ownership, newspapers lost some of the loyalty and trust that they had earned under previous managements.

If this is the case, one might expect to find that the overall impact of endorsements would have declined during the decade of the study, since the number of group-owned papers grew from 26 to 38. If the sharp differences between 1970 and 1972 are disregarded, however, no trend is evident for the 51

papers as a whole or for independent or group-owned papers (Table 4). Independent papers consistently showed wider margins of influence than did group papers, but neither category changed markedly from 1972 to 1980. With group papers growing in number but influencing fewer readers than independent papers, it would seem that an overall decrease in apparent influence should have appeared over the years. One explanation for the absence of such a trend might be that, while the number of group papers grew from election to election, loyalty to individual papers in that category also grew as readers became more accustomed to the new owners.

While one set of readers was encountering the editorials of new publishers, readers of papers that had changed hands in earlier years may have been more willing than in the past to trust the endorsements of their local papers. As long as groups continue to find newspapers to buy, according to this theory, the figures for all newspapers and for the two categories are not likely to change much. Once all or nearly all papers have become group-owned, readers no longer will be encountering new and unfamiliar publishers, unless of course the papers are resold. The rebuilding of trust and loyalty, if this theory is correct, then should begin to show up in the impact figures for group-owned newspapers as a category, as well as for newspapers as whole. A study of newspapers through the 1980s decade might reveal whether the theory has merit.

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Table 4 Apparent Impact of Endorsements by Year

	1970 (n=35)	1972 (n=33)	1974 (n=33)	1976 (n=32)	1978 (n=27)	1980 (n=24)
All Papers	2.1*	0.6	0.7	0.9	1.3	0.8
Independents	2.2	0.9	1.8	2.3	1.8	1.7
Group-Owned	2.1	0.5	0.5	0.6	1.2	0.7

* Difference between composite statewide percentage and composite percentage of popular vote favoring newspapers' endorsed position
+ All Chi Square tests significant at p<.001

Table 3 also indicates that independent papers had more apparent impact with liberal than with conservative endorsements (2.7 compared to 0.2 percent) while virtually no difference was apparent for group-owned papers (0.9 to 1.0 percent). The difference is especially notable in the candidate races, where the figure for independent papers is 5.3 percent for liberal endorsements compared to -2.9 for conservative. Group-owned papers had somewhat more apparent effect with liberal candidate endorsements, but the figures were much smaller (1.9 to -0.1 percent).

One explanation for the larger margins for liberal endorsements may lie in "unexpected" stands to which Gregg attributed some of the impact in his study.[8] During 1970-80 independent papers took a higher percentage of conservative stands, especially on candidates, than group-owned papers, as noted in Table 1. Editorials that took a liberal stand may have seemed unexpected to readers and therefore more deserving of attention than stands that fell within the traditional character of a newspaper.

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Conclusion

The study suggests that, even though the figures are statistically significant, neither the newspapers as a whole nor the subgroups of group-owned and independently owned papers made much apparent difference in the overall outcome of the statewide elections that were examined. Individual papers, of course, might well have had a substantial impact on specific propositions and candidates, large enough to account for the margin of approval or rejection in their respective circulation areas. When the entire group and the two subgroups are examined, however, the margins of apparent impact fell short of the margins of approval or rejection in the vast majority of the election issues and races.

The study found that differences existed between group-owned and independently owned papers, that the group papers seemed to take slightly more liberal stands and to exert somewhat less apparent influence on voters. The latter finding, coupled with the low overall apparent impact of endorsement editorials, may help allay fears about possible control of elections by continuously expanding groups. The figures also suggest, however, that the lesser apparent impact of group papers may be temporary. As readers become accustomed to the new owners and the new editors, they may develop the same trust and loyalty that they felt toward previous managements. If, at that point, group papers continue to take slightly more liberal stands than

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independently owned papers might have taken, one effect of the trend toward group ownership may be that the papers overall will present voters with somewhat more liberal endorsements than they have in the past.

NOTES

[1] Norman Blume and Schley Lyons, "The Monopoly Newspaper in a Local Election: The Toledo Blade," Journalism Quarterly, 45:286-292 (Summer 1968); Fred Fedler, Tim Counts and Lowndes F. Stephens, "Newspaper Endorsements and Voter Behavior in the 1980 Presidential Election," Newspaper Research Journal 4 (Fall 1982); James E. Gregg, "Newspaper Editorial Endorsements and California Elections, 1948-62," Journalism Quarterly, 42:532-538 (Fall 1965); Paul L. Hain, "How an Endorsement Affected a Non-Partisan Mayoral Vote," Journalism Quarterly, 52:337-340 (Summer 1975); Michael Hooper, "Party and Newspaper Endorsement as Predictors of Voter Choice," Journalism Quarterly, 46:302-305 (Summer 1969); Jack Sean McClenghan, "Effect of Endorsements in Texas Local Elections," Journalism Quarterly, 50:363-366 (Summer 1973); Maxwell McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence," Journalism Quarterly, 44:545-48 (Fall 1967); James L. McDowell, "The Role of Newspapers in Illinois' At-Large Election," Journalism Quarterly, 42:281-284 (Spring 1965); John P. Robinson, "The Press as King-Maker: What Surveys from Last Five Campaigns Show," Journalism Quarterly, 51:587-594 (Winter 1974)

[2] Thrift, "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor of Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 52:327-31 (Summer 1977)

[3] Daniel B. Wackman, Donald M. Gillmor, Cecilie Gaziano, and Everett Dennis, "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," Journalism Quarterly, 52:411-20 (Autumn 1975)

[4] J. Pilegge, "Two-Party Endorsements in One-Party State," Journalism Quarterly, 58:449-53 (Autumn 1981)

[5] Gregg, op. cit.

[6] Kenneth Rystrom, "Measuring the Editorial Profiles of California Daily Newspapers and the Apparent Impact of Endorsement Editorials of Those Newspapers in the 1978 and 1980 Elections." Unpublished manuscript, Western Communications Educators Conference, California State University-Fullerton, 1983

[7] Denis McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," Mass Communication and Society, edited by James Curan et al. (Beverly Hills: Sage.) Reprinted in Reader in Public Opinion and Mass Communication, edited by M. Janowitz and P. Hirsch (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 271

[8] Gregg, op. cit., 537

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